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Sermon: “No Take-backs” (Romans 11:29)

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When I was a kid in elementary school there were certain rules that we lived by, a code that if breached would make you vulnerable to the wrath of the other kids at school. One of these rules, of course, was no cutting in line. Sure, it was permissible to scramble to get as close to the front of the line as possible, but once the line was established, there was to be no cutting. Another rule was no trying to be the teacher’s pet. Sure, it was permissible to be civil with your teacher, even friendly in extreme cases, but there was to be no overt acts to earn the teacher’s favor, at least in front of the class.

A third rule was no take-backs. This meant that once you gave something away, you could not ask for it back. No take-backs applied to every case when a classmate gave away a valuable commodity to another classmate, like a pencil or magic marker, a baseball card, a finely crafted paper football, or the rare but occasional gift of a Snack Pack or Hostess Cupcake. If you gave one of these valuable commodities away, there was to be no asking for it back. If someone asked for it back the offended party would simply say, “No take-backs,” and that was the end of it. If not, you ran the risk of facing wrath on the playground.

Today I am preaching on a verse from the lesson from Paul’s Letter to the Romans, specifically Romans 11:29 in which Paul writes, “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. To be irrevocable means not to be recalled or changed. To be irrevocable means unable to be repealed or annulled or undone. Irrevocable means no take-backs.

“The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable,” Paul writes. At this point in his Letter to the Romans Paul is describing God’s relationship with Israel. He emphasizes that in spite of Israel’s disobedience to God, God never took back the gifts he gave them, as he had written earlier in chapter 9: “to (the Israelites) belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah” (9:4-5).

Throughout the Old Testament we see again and again that God gave these gifts to Israel and did not take them back. We see again and again that God called Israel his chosen people and never took that back. Many of the prominent leaders of the Old Testament were broken sinners, like Jacob who deceived his own brother and father, Moses who had a short temper, Samson who chased prostitutes, David who committed murder and adultery, Hezekiah who catered to the heathen—it goes on and on. And yet in spite of their disobedience God did not disown them. In spite of their unfaithfulness to God, God remained faithful to them.

When it came to the gifts and calling God gave to Israel, there were no take-backs. The late biblical scholar F. F. Bruce put it this way:

“The promises which God made to the patriarchs when he called them are secured to their descendants, not on the ground of merit, but on the ground of God’s fidelity to his word of grace” (*Romans* p. 210).

And in today’s passage from Romans Paul not only writes, “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable,” he continues by emphasizing the mercy of God:

“Just as you (Gentiles) were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of (Israel’s) disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all” (11:30-32).

In other words, when it comes to Israel, *God’s mercy is the final word*.

But this is not just the case with Israel, but with you and me too.

That is good news, because our life experience is replete with take-backs.

Most people do not learn the “no take-backs” rule in elementary school. When it comes to the gifts people give one another, there is often a catch, there are often strings attached, there are often take-backs. And these take-backs often involve things much more important than baseball cards or Hostess Cupcakes.

Sometimes when a marriage falls on hard times a person will take back the vows made at their wedding and ask for a divorce. Sometimes a company will take back an offer made to an excited new employee and offer the job to someone else. Sometimes the gifts people give one another are yoked to unspoken expectations and run the risk of being taken back.

Take-backs often occur in relationships. In his song, *Lonesome Day*, Bruce Springsteen articulates the heartbreak this creates:

Once I thought I knew
Everything I needed to know about you
Your sweet whisper, your tender touch
But I didn't really know that much
Joke's on me; it's gonna be okay
If I can just get through this lonesome day

There have even been take-backs with God’s favorite football team, the Washington Redskins ☺, who acquired veteran quarterback Donovan McNabb to be their new starting quarterback only to bench him and later discard him for a few draft picks. (As a fan, I’m still banking on God’s mercy being the final word for the Washington Redskins ☺).

I recently read Paul Harding's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Tinkers* (2009), which describes the internal reminiscences of an old man named George Crosby who is on his death bed. George Crosby, like many of us, experienced take-backs in his life, and was trying to make sense of it all. Early in the novel Harding writes:

“George Crosby remembered many things as he died, but in an order he could not control. To look at his life, to take the stock he always imagined a man would at his end, was to witness a shifting mass, the tiles of a mosaic spinning, swirling, re-portraying, always in recognizable swaths of colors, familiar elements, molecular units, intimate currents, but also independent now of his will, showing him a different self every time he tried to make an assessment” (p. 18).

As it was with George Crosby so our life experience can be confusing and non-linear, and the take-backs in our lives only increase the difficulty of assessing it all.

And not only are the things people say often revocable, the events in our lives are irrevocable: we cannot turn back the clock and undo or redo things in our lives we wish we would have not done or would have done differently.

In T. S. Eliot's play, *The Family Reunion*, one of the main characters, named Agatha, is anticipating the painful and awkward return of her nephew Harry who has not seen the family in eight years, and is begrudgingly returning home for his mother's birthday:

“I mean painful because everything is irrevocable,
Because the past is irremediable,
Because the future can only be built
Upon the real past.”

In some ways Agatha is exactly right: “Everything is irrevocable.” What's done is done.

Last week my wife Steph and I dropped our oldest daughter off at college, and it really hit us that her childhood is over. It went by so quickly. One minute we're reading *Good Night Moon* to her before rocking her to sleep, the next we're walking her to Kindergarten. We turn around and we're coaching her in soccer or basketball and buying her ice cream after she gets her braces on. A minute later we're helping her with homework and then hoping she doesn't ask for help because the classes she's taking are beyond us. The next thing we know we're driving her to her high school graduation and then dropping her off at college. It doesn't really matter if we would want to go back in time and undo or redo anything as parents. What's done is done.

So we see that on the one hand our lives are filled with take-backs, promises that apparently are revocable; and on the other hand the past events in our lives are irrevocable; what's done is done. This can leave our hearts hard, unwilling to believe that there are no take-backs with God, that

the gifts and the calling of God really are irrevocable, that God's mercy is the final word. It just sounds too good to be true.

But it is true. That is the good news of the gospel.

For God has given all of us the greatest gift of all in Jesus Christ who died on the cross for our sins, as Jesus himself said: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16).

A couple weeks ago the Discovery Channel celebrated Shark Week, which means an entire week packed with documentaries about sharks. My family loves Shark Week. One evening we gathered around to watch yet another shark documentary and the following disclaimer appeared on the screen: "This program contains actual video of real events and acts of foolishness that may be disturbing to some viewers. Viewer discretion is advised."

Our lives are filled with "acts of foolishness" that are irrevocable. (Some even become part of shark documentaries ☺). But the good news of the gospel is that out of love for all of us Jesus Christ gave his life for us on the cross, an act the Greeks of his day considered utter foolishness, but as Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom" and Jesus' death on the cross is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (from I Corinthians 1:22-25).

While Jesus' death on the cross is "disturbing to some viewers," it is the final and ultimate expression of the irrevocable, foolish love of God for us.

Jesus' death on the cross is the event of "the real past" upon which the present and future of the spinning mosaics of our lives are built. All the take-backs of your life, all the irrevocable past events of your life, all the acts of foolishness of your life are covered, completely covered, by the irrevocable love of Jesus Christ. What's done is done.

The good news of the gospel is that indeed "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable," that God's mercy is the final word, that when it comes to God's love for us, there are no take-backs.

Amen.